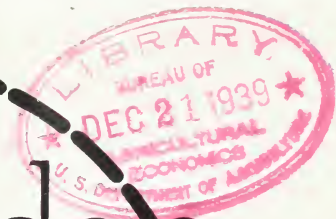
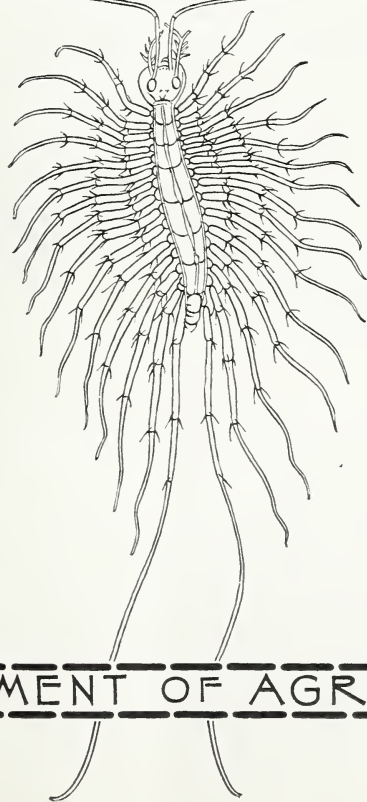


Historic, archived document

Do not assume content reflects current scientific knowledge, policies, or practices.



Centipedes and Millipedes in the House



LEAFLET
NO. 192

U. S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

CENTIPEDES AND MILLIPEDES IN THE HOUSE

By E. A. BACK, *principal entomologist, Division of Insects Affecting Man and Animals, Bureau of Entomology and Plant Quarantine*

Centipedes ¹

Centipedes are normally outdoor creatures that feed upon insects and other small animals. They do not injure plants or house furnishings. They run rapidly, having one pair of strong legs on each body segment. They prefer damp situations and are found mostly under stones, dead leaves, and old boards, and about grass roots and rubbish piles. Their bodies are relatively long in proportion to their width and are greatly flattened. This shape and their many body segments give them a ribbonlike appearance (fig. 1). The flattened body makes it possible for centipedes to squeeze into cracks and crevices, from which they sometimes penetrate to wall spaces of houses and find their way thence into living and sleeping rooms, where they conceal themselves in shoes, in folds of clothing, behind pillows, in beds, and in other darkened places. Were it not for their habit of coming into houses, centipedes would be of little concern to man.

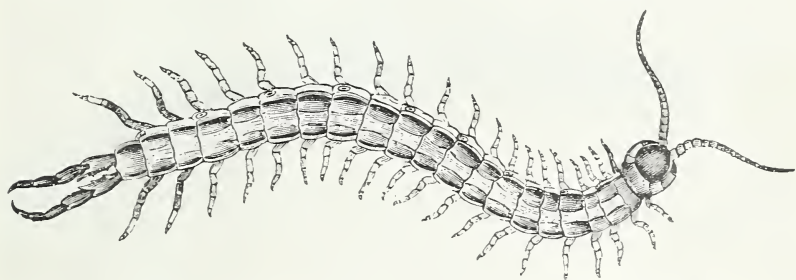


FIGURE 1.—A large centipede (*Scolopendra obscura* Newp.) viewed from above. (After Koch.) About one-half natural size. This drawing of a European species shows the typical segmentation of the body and arrangement of the legs of species of the genus *Scolopendra* that occur in the Southern States.

Centipedes are feared by many because they have poison glands in the claws of the first pair of leglike appendages. The poison injected into insects and other tiny creatures when they are bitten by a centipede usually causes immediate death or paralysis, thus aiding the centipede in capturing its prey. Most centipedes throughout the North are comparatively small and rarely, if ever, enter houses or bite man. A brown species (*Lithobius forficatus* L.) commonly found in

¹Class Chilopoda.

gardens has nine long and six short body segments, similar to those of the species shown in figure 2. In the Southern States two species (*Scolopendra heros* Girard and *S. morsitans* L.) occur which may become 4 to 6 inches long. These have 21 pairs of legs, which are about as long as the body is wide. Any one of these larger (*Scolopendra*) centipedes (figs. 1 and 3) can inflict a painful bite if it is pinched when a person puts on or handles clothing in the folds of which it happens to be hiding. There seems to be no record of a centipede seriously harming persons in this country, although secondary infection may result from the bite. Centipedes are not welcome in houses, even though they feed upon insects and may truthfully be considered beneficial. Certain tropical centipedes are reputed to be very poisonous.

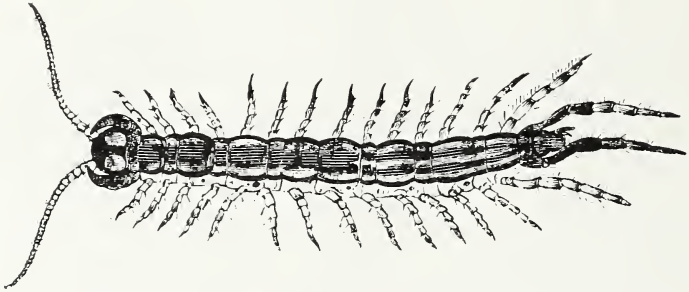


FIGURE 2.—A small centipede (*Lithobius erythrocephalus* Koch) viewed from above. (After Koch.) About twice natural size. This European species is typical of the shape of the species of the genus *Lithobius* that are common in the United States.

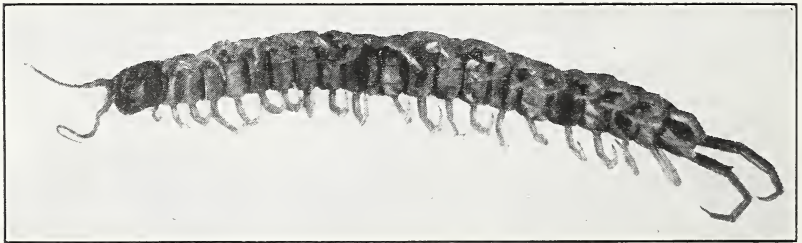


FIGURE 3.—A large centipede (*Scolopendra heros*) from Texas. About two-thirds natural size. Note the wide body plates on the lower side of the body.

The House Centipede

The house centipede (*Scutigera forceps* Raf.) (fig. 4) thrives in damp basements in houses and often finds its way to the upper floors. Although it may be found outdoors also, it is capable of reproducing within the house, which does not seem to be true of other centipedes in this country. It has a wormlike body, an inch or more in length, with a pair of very long, slender antennae springing from the head, and with 15 pairs of long legs arranged along the sides of its body, the last pair being much more than twice the length of the body in the female. The body is grayish yellow, marked above with three longitudinal dark stripes, and its legs are banded with white. Although it is fragile and easily crushed and dismembered, the house centipede runs rapidly,

holding its body well elevated above the surface over which it is moving. It often stops running suddenly, remains motionless, and then with equal suddenness races to concealment. While the popular belief is that the house centipede is poisonous, it is doubtful if it ever deliberately bites man. The jaws are so weak that it is hard for them

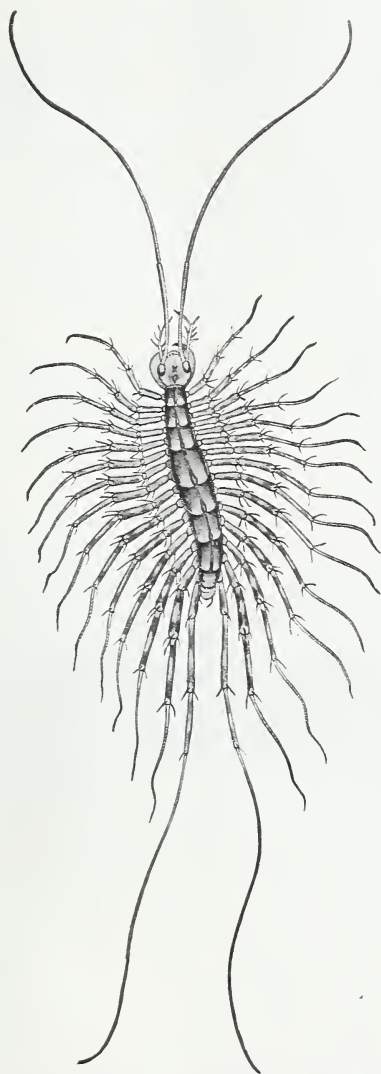


FIGURE 4.—The house centipede (*Scutigera forceps*). About natural size.

to penetrate the skin, and bites inflicted by them are few and the symptoms not severe. Were it not for the possibility of being bitten, the house centipede should be considered as helpful, for, being carnivorous, it feeds upon cockroaches, flies, moths, spiders, and other small creatures.

Control of Centipedes

There is no satisfactory control for centipedes. Sprays and powders are not practical, for usually centipedes in houses are not numerous and their location is not predictable. Grass about the house should be kept well cut, and piles of rubbish, such as stones and boards, removed. House foundations should be tightened as much as is practicable by filling in or boarding over cracks large enough to admit centipedes. Debris should not be left beneath houses raised on concrete or other blocks, for this encourages the increase of centipedes. Doors and windows should be well screened. Once centipedes are within the house, they can be killed as found. Clothing should be shaken well before it is used and centipedes dropping from it promptly crushed. Hiding places in cellars should be eliminated by removing stored articles, so far as possible. Houses raised from the ground on piers may be given some protection by spraying the piers and the soil beneath the house with creosote oil. If bitten, apply ammonia or moist baking soda, followed by a mild germicide as a protection against secondary infection.

Millipedes ²

Millipedes, like centipedes, are normally outdoor creatures. They are not carnivorous, but feed upon decaying vegetable matter in damp soil and on decaying wood, and often eat the tender roots of plants and even green leaves that touch the ground. A few are pests of cultivated crops. Millipedes are slow-crawling creatures with rounded many-jointed bodies. They have two pairs of very short legs on each body segment after the first three, which have only one pair each. If touched when crawling, they curl up. Most of our native millipedes are less than 1 inch long. The species *Paraiulus venustus* Wood and *P. impressus* Say, most frequently annoying to householders and often forwarded for identification, are brownish, sometimes from 1 to 1½ inches long (fig. 5), and as large around as the lead of an ordinary pencil. A large native species (*Spirobolus marginatus* Say) with about 57 body segments (fig. 6) is common under logs in the Eastern States and sometimes enters houses. It may become 4 inches long. It is of a dark mahogany-brown color, each segment being marked with red, and its antennae and legs being reddish.

At certain times millipedes become restless for some reason and then leave the soil and crawl into houses, sometimes swarming over basements and the first-floor rooms. Millipedes are most troublesome during the fall of the year, when hordes may crawl into areas, into cellars, up foundation walls, and through small openings, and reach the interior of living rooms. They may crawl up side walls and drop from ceilings. More often they are confined to the basement and to the floors of rooms over unexcavated soil. The fall migrations are possibly concerned with a natural urge to seek hibernation quarters. Sometimes continued or heavy rains raise the water level in the soil, force the millipedes out of their natural abode, and send them in search of shelter elsewhere. In cottages in wooded areas, or in newly developed areas with virgin soil still filled with

²Class Diplopoda.

much decaying vegetation, as many as 700 millipedes may enter a room during a single evening.

Millipedes shun the sun, are most abundant on the shaded side of a house, crawl during the evening, and hide during the daytime in the soil, or beneath stones and boards, or in other darkened places.

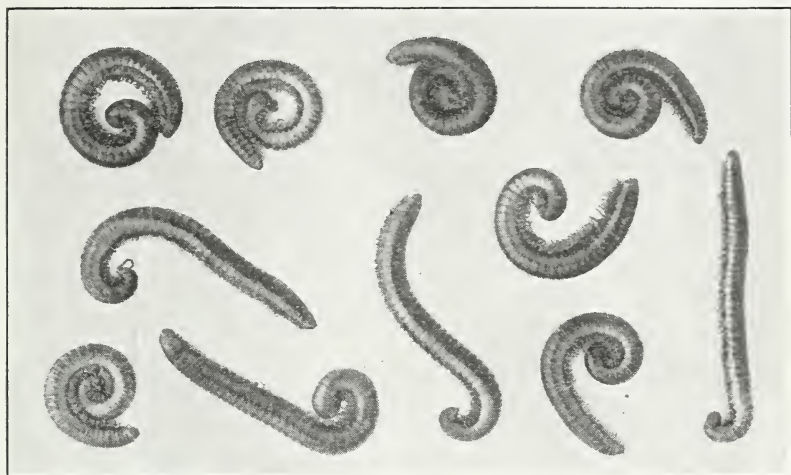


FIGURE 5.—The brown millipede (*Paraiulus venustus*). Twice natural size. These migrating specimens were found in houses.

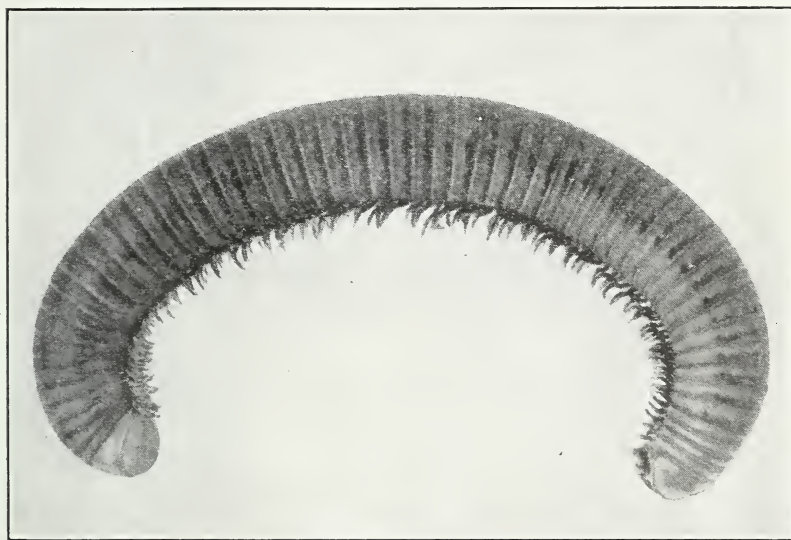


FIGURE 6.—A large millipede (*Spirobolus marginatus*). About twice natural size.

They prefer dampness. Dryness destroys them. Millipedes do not bite persons, do not harm house furnishings, and do not eat sound wood. But an invasion of millipedes usually disrupts the contentment of any home and calls for remedial measures.

Control of Millipedes

When present in small numbers, millipedes can be controlled by placing slices of raw potatoes, apples, or turnips, lightly dusted with paris green, where they can feed upon them. Creosote oil, sprayed on the outside of foundation walls and on the soil close to the house, is distasteful to millipedes. Scattering naphthalene flakes or paradichlorobenzene crystals about the house foundations and working them slightly into the soil aids in controlling millipedes, as does also liberal dusting with air-slaked lime. Lumps of dough, sweetened with molasses, may be used as traps; these should be collected at frequent intervals and the millipedes attracted to them destroyed.

When millipedes are migrating to a house in large numbers none of the suggested control measures are entirely satisfactory, for the places of those killed will be taken quickly by other millipedes crawling out of inaccessible wall spaces or from outdoors. Under such conditions it will be necessary to supplement the controls mentioned above, or any one of them, with persistent and liberal applications of a kerosene-pyrethrum fly spray at those times of the day when the millipedes are actively crawling.

Removing materials such as piles of leaves, boards, and brick from around the house tends to prevent trouble from these creatures, as does also pointing up the foundation both inside and outside.

